

# Bulk Goes Seamless

## Like, Isn't it Intermodal?

DAVIS HELBERG

*The author is executive director, Seaway Port Authority of Duluth, Duluth, Minnesota and a member of the Transportation Research Board's Standing Committee on Ports and Channels.*

They say the beauty of the English language is its elasticity, its ability to absorb foreign words, coined words, slang expressions, and words reflecting new technology and science. I agree, but it is this very sponginess of our language that also drives me to distraction—especially when we start clouding clarity. I wince, for example, when teenagers say “bad” for something they view as good, or “awesome” for anything not merely ordinary. And I cringe when I hear people describing some earlier event by saying, “He goes, like...” and “She goes, like...” instead of “He said...” and “She said...” At that point, I go, like, “yuck.”

Regrettably, claptrap of a more sophisticated variety has infected transportation. Since when, for example, does “intermodal” automatically mean cargo carried in a container? This presumes, of course, that one accepts “intermodal” as a word; it does not appear in my dictionary, at least, or on spellcheck.

The Intermodal Surface Transportation Efficiency Act of 1991 spawned its own linguistic wonderland. For example, at our port the funding process requires approval in the TIP by HTAC, a subunit of our MPO whose staff is provided by ARDC on authority from MIC, and then it goes to RTAC and ultimately to MNDOT. (If you want this statement decoded, please contact our environmental and governmental affairs director, also known as EGAD). He may ask whether your specific interest in ISTEA involves STP or CMAQ.

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EDITOR'S NOTE: *This article is part of the TR News Point of View series in which opinions of contributing authors on transportation issues are presented. The views expressed do not necessarily represent those of the Transportation Research Board or TR News. Readers are encouraged to comment on the issues and opinions presented in this series in the form of a letter to the editor.*

The proposed ISTEA reauthorization packages spawned even more acronyms—NEXTEA, BESTEA, HOTEA, STARS—which, interestingly enough, do not include the word “intermodal.” Congress eventually settled on TEA-21, but the newspapers continued to use the term “the Highway Bill.” I digress, however. Let me get back to the concept of intermodal.

The mail brings numerous invitations to intermodal conferences and seminars. Almost invariably, the agenda is focused on the container trade. Speakers at port and trade conferences run endless overhead charts on emerging intermodal traffic patterns, and generally fail to point out that the entire presentation is based on containerized cargo projections. Trade publications have embraced the word. Advertising invitations proclaim a special intermodal section—devoted, of course, to container news.

When I was chairman of the American Association of Port Authorities, I was invited to speak at the Intermodal Expo in Atlanta. I accepted, but after recognizing that I was the only speaker who did not represent container interests, I committed what some might regard as heresy. “Where is it written,” I asked, “that intermodalism is the exclusive domain of the container? And where does it say that intermodalism applies solely to the export-import business, or that problems related to, say, landside access to ports are problems peculiar to container ports?”

The thrust of my remarks was that while containerization unquestionably launched the biggest revolution in the maritime industry since the advent of steam power, the fact is that only about one-eighth of this nation's international trade volume (not value, mind you, but volume) is carried in boxes. And if one adds non-inland waterway domestic commerce—which at a billion tons a year rivals the total volume of our international trade—the percentage of U.S. cargo that moves in containers is small indeed. Nonetheless, noncon-

tainerized cargo, starting with bulk commodities, has virtually disappeared from the attention screens of the policy makers, the politicians, and the press. Yet if we accept “intermodalism” and “seamless transportation” as both concepts and goals—as we must—what is more purely intermodal than the movement of most bulk cargo?

At the risk of exposing my parochialism, consider that my port, Duluth-Superior, has been a classic example of intermodalism for a century. It is just that until recently, we did not have a fancy name for it.

When iron ore was discovered on Minnesota’s Iron Range in the 1890s, it began to be shipped—and still is—on specially built railcars to specially built docks for carriage by specially built ships to specially built docks for delivery to steel mills by (what else?) specially built railcars. Fast, competitive, and with minimum lost motion, this system keeps Duluth-Superior the largest ore-shipping port in the United States, and as close to seamless as one gets short of a pipeline.

Low-sulfur coal moves into the port daily on unit trains from Wyoming and Montana for vessel carriage to the lower Great Lakes, Canada, and occasionally overseas destinations. A 112-car train is discharged by one person in a control booth in about 2 hours, and a 65,000-ton ship is loaded in 6 hours—by one person on deck with a hand-held remote control. Bulk grain from the Dakotas and western Minnesota arrives daily by train or truck for ultimate vessel loading, while limestone,

cement, and aggregates arrive by ship and are carried inland by rail or truck.

Last year, in a 9½-month navigation season, Duluth-Superior moved more than 40 million short tons of cargo. Less than 2 percent was either generated or consumed in our small metropolitan area. The transportation modes meet here for cargo coming from or going somewhere else—around the clock, without much fanfare, and, by the way, intermodally.

So is this port—or any bulk or petrochemical or “neobulk” (another lovely word) port—any less of a port because it does not provide conventional container services? Are the dockworkers and pilots and agents second class in ports whose skylines are not laced with a forest of container cranes?

I ask only this: the next time you see or hear someone boldly predicting that the North American port industry is in big trouble, that we are not far removed from the day when there will be only a few select load centers on the East and West Coasts, ask the speaker or writer or researcher to define the cargo he or she has in mind. Load centers for what? Containers? Or the 85 percent of our ports’ cargoes *not* carried in containers? When the answer is, “Sorry, I was talking about intermodal cargoes,” you might go, “Wow, like, awesome.”

An earlier version of this article appeared in *The Journal of Commerce*.

### Correction

In the January–February issue of *TR News*, Figures 1 and 2 in the article “Technology of the Future” (page 25) were transposed as a result of a printing error. The correct figures and captions are shown below.

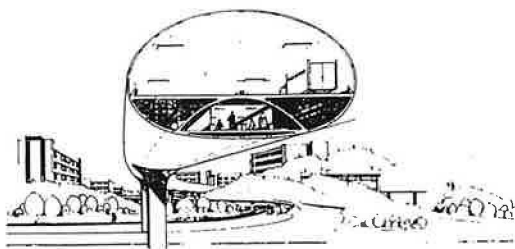


FIGURE 1 Proposal for tubular highway with high-performance concrete deck and fiber composite enveloping enclosure.

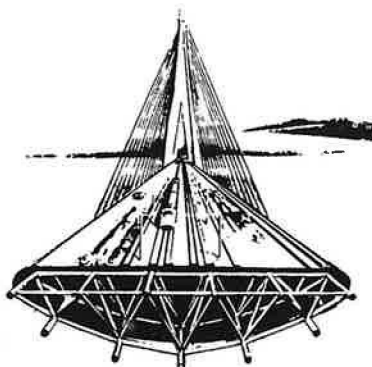


FIGURE 2 SPACES system with tubular space frame enclosed by a structurally participating fiber composite skin.